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SENSITIVE

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STATE PASS USTR FOR JOHN MELLE AND MARY SULLIVAN

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SUBJECT: HARPER TWEAKS CABINET, BOLSTERS QUEBEC PRESENCE

REF: Ottawa 707

¶1. (U) Summary: Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper fine-tuned his Cabinet in a minor shuffle on June 25, bolstering representation from Quebec following the sudden resignation of former Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier in May (reftel). Bernier's interim successor David Emerson won confirmation as Minister of Foreign Affairs, while Montreal Senator Michael Fortier was appointed to the International Trade portfolio. Fellow Quebecer Christian Paradis was promoted to Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC). The shuffle emphasized continuity and signaled the government's commitment to build support in Quebec. End summary.

THE GOVERNMENT IS "ON TRACK"

¶2. (U) PM Harper shuffled his Cabinet for the third time since February 2006 in an 11:00 a.m. ceremony on June 25. He declined to comment following the ceremony, except to reassure Canadians that his team was "on track and will stay on track." Similarly, the three new appointees declined comment. The Prime Minister's Office subsequently released a statement praising the "small but important changes" which would allow the government to build on its achievements, and deliver the "strong leadership Canadians expect and deserve." Last week Harper said that his ministers were "hitting their stride" and that it was not the right time for a comprehensive overhaul. The promotion of the two Quebec ministers was primarily designed to reassure Quebecers that the province retains its influence within the inner circle of power despite Bernier's departure.

EMERSON CONFIRMED AS MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

¶3. (U) The shuffle confirmed the continued appointment of David Emerson as Minister of Foreign Affairs. Emerson held the Foreign Affairs, International Trade, and Olympics portfolios on an interim basis since May. Although many observers have noted that Harper has finally found a Foreign Minister with the intellectual heft and experience for the job, doubts persist over whether Emerson will run in the next election.

A GOOD FIT FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE

¶4. (U) Senator Michael Fortier, the former Minister of PWGSC, is an urbane former international business lawyer and investment banker with strong qualifications for the International Trade portfolio. He ran unsuccessfully for the Conservative Party and was later appointed to both the Senate and to Cabinet by Harper in February 2006. At first glance, Fortier's new post is less a clear promotion than a lateral move, although his personal closeness to Harper, and his political network in Quebec, make him an influential player in

Cabinet.

¶5. (U) As a Senator, Fortier is prohibited from speaking in the Commons. Fortier was ably represented in the Commons as Minister of PWGSC by his previous Parliamentary Secretary, James Moore, whose bilingualism and deft performance largely compensated for his boss's absence. International Trade is more high profile and publicly visible than PWGSC, however, and it is unclear whether the same stop-gap solution can work effectively for Fortier in his new portfolio. Harper may choose to appoint a Parliamentary spokesperson to field trade-related questions in the Commons, or answer them himself.

¶6. (U) When he entered Cabinet in 2006, Fortier committed to running in the next election in the Montreal (Quebec) riding of Vaudreuil-Solanges, but there has been speculation that he would change his mind and leave public life entirely, or seek a more winnable riding. Fortier has reportedly built a considerable organization in the riding, but the extensive travel required by his new portfolio could hamper his ability to spend time there politicking.

BIG PROMOTION FOR RURAL QUEBEC

¶7. (U) Christian Paradis, a French-Canadian rural MP little-known even in Quebec, was given the sprawling PWGSC portfolio, which handles procurement, sales and real estate for the federal government. Although not in the first rank of Cabinet posts, PWGSC controls one of the largest budgets in the federal government. Its contracting power -- and potential for distributing largesse -- should give the new minister a significant profile in Quebec. Unusually, Paradis also retained his previous junior ministerial

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responsibility as Secretary of State for Agriculture (a major and politically sensitive industry in Quebec). The bilingual Paradis will also continue to back-stop in French for the unilingual Anglophone Minister of Agriculture, Gerry Ritz.

OLYMPICS, PACIFIC GATEWAY AND OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

¶8. (U) The only new addition to the Ministry (but not the Cabinet) is British Columbia MP James Moore, previously Parliamentary Secretary for PWGSC. As a new Secretary of State for Pacific Gateway, Vancouver-Whistler Olympics Official Languages, Moore receives a promotion.

¶9. (U) Secretaries of State are junior ministers and are not members of Cabinet. They do not attend Cabinet meetings, but attend meetings of appropriate Cabinet Committees in light of their responsibilities. However, they are members of the Ministry (the executive branch) and of the Privy Council and are therefore bound by Cabinet solidarity and Cabinet confidence.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The minor scope of the shuffle reinforced the government's emphasis on continuity and Quebec. Some observers continue to speculate that today's limited tweaking may be followed by a more comprehensive realignment in the late fall or winter if there is no election. Harper has made it clear, however, that he is satisfied with his present team. Any further changes in the next six months would likely send the unhelpful message that his team has fallen off track. End comment.

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